

EPA Region 5 Records Ctr.



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Our viewpoint

Shallow debate on joint use

Debate about the joint use of Scott Air Force Base for civilian as well as military purposes has been a major disappointment.

The primary question about whether the plan would be a rational and efficient use of public resources has been trivialized by regional politics. Almost to a person, Missouri officials oppose joint use and Illinois officials support it. The purely political catfight has resumed now than an Illinois Department of Transportation study has concluded that Scott could handle 2.5 million passengers a year by 2005, if it were converted to a joint military-civilian airport.

From a metro-east perspective, it would be shameful if the joint-use proposal were killed by powerful St. Louis interests for political reasons alone. A commercial airport on this side of the river would be a major convenience for Illinois passengers, as well as some Missourians.

But convenience is not the only consideration. Lambert-St. Louis International Airport seems poorly positioned to accommodate increasing regional demand for air traffic. Under joint use, Scott would not replace Lambert as the region's No. 1 airport, but would supplement its service. The joint-use proposal falls far short of previous proposals to build a full-blown commercial airport near Waterloo.

Furthermore, the metro-east is not an island, but a vital part of the entire metropolitan St. Louis area. Joint-use probably would provide economic benefits for the area as a whole. And joint use might also enhance military flexibility at Scott.

The possible need for supplementary airports in a major metropolitan area is not unique to the St. Louis area. Most of the 10 largest air traffic markets in the country have more than one airport. Thus, St. Louis, one of the top 10 markets, may be a good candidate for a second airport on the grounds of rational planning and economic efficiency.

Unfortunately, the issue may not be decided on those grounds. Some officials seem intent on allowing regional politics to blind them from making reasonable decisions. St. Louis County Executive Gene McNary provides the perfect example. "When Chicago is willing to move O'Hare to Indiana, I'll support moving Lambert to Illinois," he said recently.

The questions of whether Lambert needs to be supplemented and whether joint use at Scott would be beneficial to the regional economy are legitimate. The McNary approach to answering them is not.